Social Sustainability in Agriculture: An Anthropological Perspective on Child Labour in Cocoa Production in Ghana

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ABSTRACT Based on historical sources and ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana, the article presents child labour in cocoa communities as the outcome of a complex myriad of micro-level factors. It argues that many policy initiatives to address this problem have been hindered by a lack of understanding of the social and historical context impacting child rights in cocoa-producing communities. It also argues that by enabling a more grounded and gender-sensitive understanding of the household dimension of poor labour practices and of the plurality of factors underlying them, ethnography makes an important contribution to debates on unfree labour.

Introduction

This article discusses child labour in cocoa-producing communities in Ghana. The picture of child labour which will be described may in some ways seem at odds with the images of slavery and exploitation which abound on this subject in the public domain and on which the literature on unfree labour typically focuses. However, to summarise some of the key points of the analysis, the article aims to illustrate that children in cocoa households can fall victim to micro-level pressures (such as family breakdown) which undermine their ability not to enter the workforce and thus make them ‘unfree’. Because this ‘unfreedom’ is part of much wider processes of societal change, it is often undetected in policy circles and is extremely difficult to address.

Through this discussion, the article contributes to debates on unfree labour in a number of ways. Firstly, it places unfree labour in cocoa in the historical context of global cocoa production, which is an approach that has been identified as lacking in some of the literature (Lerche, 2007; Nieuwenhuys, 1996). The historical data are used to show the important household dimension of labour in cocoa, which the article argues remains central today. Secondly, the analysis illustrates that some of the literature on unfree labour, by not engaging sufficiently with the interlinkages between individuals, households and the transnational spheres, can promote an androcentric perspective. Finally, by contending that child labour can be unfree even in the absence of coercion or criminal exploitation, and that agency needs to be redefined, the article argues that the concept of unfree labour does not apply to adult and child labour in the same way. This latter point feeds into wider debates on unfree labour, which are also discussed by other authors in this issue. For example, as argued by Frantz, ethnographic evidence often challenges existing categorisations, and results in a reconfiguration of the terminology of unfree labour. More fundamentally, the data presented here reflect the fact that coercion...
exists in various forms and to various degrees and thus fits broader debates in unfree labour as to the limitation of any form of categorisation. As other authors have argued, labour processes typically fall somewhere within a spectrum of unfreedoms rather under neat dichotomous labels (Lerche, 2011; Phillips, 2011) and these should not be homogenised (Kothari, this issue). Categorisations have also come under question in the field of child rights (Panter-Brick, 2002), and subsequent sections of this article will review how the present case study relates to wider debates on child labour.

The ethnographic data presented in the article are based on long-term anthropological fieldwork carried out over 15 months from 2001 to 2003 in the Ashanti region (a well-established cocoa region) of Ghana, subsequent shorter follow-up visits to the field, and interviews with key informants in the UK. The research in Ghana used qualitative methods such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews. As participant observation was the main research method used, the total number of informants cannot be quantified. However, in addition to the research carried out with cocoa farmers, data were also gathered from a sample of 84 children using child-friendly participatory research methods. This involved using age-appropriate research tools such as informal interviews, drawings and simple surveys. Further information on this is provided in Berlan (2006).

In the communities under study, all the children interviewed were local children, although not necessarily from the household they were in, and almost all of them were family labour. The article will examine the factors influencing their entry into the worst forms of child labour of various kinds, not only their work in cocoa. The fact that no trafficked children were found in cocoa during the fieldwork supports the view that there is more family labour than non-family labour in cocoa, although this was not tested systematically. Trafficked children working in cocoa have been the focus of considerable media attention, although the extent of the problem has also come into question (Bales 2007; Blowfield, 2003). Because trafficked children were not the focus of the fieldwork, and owing to space constraints and to the complexity of this issue, this article cannot provide a separate discussion of it and will instead focus on non-trafficked child labour in cocoa communities.

Child Labour and Child Work

Concerns about labour abuses in cocoa production became widespread in the UK and other countries in 2000–2001 following documentaries and newspaper coverage alleging the use of child slaves in West Africa (Anti-Slavery International, 2004; Bales, 2007; Blowfield, 2003). These focused on the discovery of enslaved young men on a cocoa farm in the Côte d’Ivoire, and soon spread concerns that such practices were also being used in other West African countries. Fears of abuse in the chocolate supply chain emerged again when a ship found in the Gulf of Guinea carrying migrants was initially thought to be carrying a cargo of ‘children to labour in the sprawling cocoa plantations’ (McGreal, 2001). However, some of these allegations were never fully substantiated and many commentators have since expressed doubts about the validity of some of the claims made and the true scale of the problem (Anti-Slavery International, 2004; Bales, 2007; Berlan, 2009). As Blowfield points out, based on the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture research on the subject, ‘initial reports that 90% of cocoa farms in Côte d’Ivoire used forced child labour have been revised down to less than 2%’ (2003, p. 18).

These concerns notwithstanding, there is evidence to indicate that cocoa production in West Africa does involve some use of illegal child labour, defined as child trafficking or the involvement of children in hazardous activities. As stated, the present article will not provide a separate discussion of child trafficking and will focus on hazardous child labour, though it is important to note that many of the causalities which will be described may apply equally to both. The 2007 pilot survey on labour practices in cocoa production in Ghana1 (commissioned by the Ghanaian government’s National Programme for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Cocoa) found that in the 2005–2006 cocoa season, children aged between 5 and 12 were involved in tasks such as the spraying of insecticides, application of fertiliser, bush burning, clearing land and felling trees. Though the proportion of respondents in some categories was low (for example, only 0.7% of children surveyed in that age group reported being involved in land clearing and only 1.7% reported spraying insecticide), these tasks
are hazardous because of the risks they pose to the health and wellbeing of children (NPECLC, 2007). However, the exact number of children working in the cocoa sector is not known (NPECLC, 2007) and even comprehensive surveys on this issue rely on projections based on particular sets of assumptions, which can reduce accuracy (Tulane University, 2009). In the broader context of Ghanaian society, child labour is well-documented. Of children aged 5–17 years, 39 per cent are known to be engaged in economic activities, of which 57 per cent are engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing and 88 per cent are unpaid family labour or apprentices (Ghana Statistical Service, 2003). Children involved in cocoa production fall in both these categories. The ILO definition of the worst forms of child labour (ILO, 2004) covers cases where children working in cocoa are not enrolled in school, work makes them leave school prematurely or they have to combine school attendance with long hours or heavy work. The analysis will show that there is scope to gain a better understanding of the causalities behind a child ending up in one of the worst forms of child labour. For example, as will be discussed, the question of why children are not enrolled in school or why they left school prematurely needs to be considered in much greater contextual detail if such issues are to be addressed effectively.

The initial allegations of labour abuses were met with disbelief, many observers commenting that child labour should not be confused with child work. As stated in the NPECLC report:

Traditionally, working on family farms and with family enterprises is seen as part of the process by which children are trained towards adulthood ... Children’s involvement in the production of cocoa is an age-old tradition which, besides the immediate labour value, constitutes a traditional way of imparting cocoa farming skills to them and equipping them to take over from ageing parents and relatives. (NPECLC, 2007, 6–7)

Because I have already discussed the notion of hazardous activities, skill acquisition and the socio-cultural significance of child work elsewhere (Berlan 2004, 2006, 2009) they will not be discussed in the present article. It is nevertheless important to point out that the issue of child labour in cocoa exemplifies much wider debates about the often problematic distinction between child labour and child work in West Africa (Ajayi & Torimiro, 2004) and beyond (Boyden 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout 1998; Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Pierik and Houwerzijl, 2006; Woodhead, 1999). However, the debate on child labour and child work will also not be entered into here, either in relation to cocoa or more generally, as it has already been covered extensively and is a debate that ‘many are rightly tired of’ (White, 1996, p. 836), and:

It is impossible to draw a clear and unambiguous line between ‘child work’ (the more acceptable forms of children’s work, which are relatively unharmonious and in cases may even be beneficial) and ‘child labour’, the unacceptable, exploitative and harmful forms of children's work, a ‘social evil’. Most attempts to draw such a line are either too general, vague and circular to be of use, or if they try to be concrete and specific, are too contradictory and illogical, and out of line with the views of children themselves. (White, 1996, p. 837)

This position is also shared by the ILO:

the line between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ work for children is difficult to draw. This occurs quite frequently, especially in rural agricultural situations, as certain kinds of work actually form part of socio-cultural traditions.(ILO, 2004, p. 19)

Debates on child labour in cocoa also illustrate other debates in the field of child rights. This includes the wider tendency for debates on the rights of children to be plagued by ethnocentrism (Boyden, 1997; Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Pierik and Houwerzijl 2006; Woodhead, 1997) and the fact that the analysis of children’s work is considerably limited by prevailing notions of labour and exploitation which sit uneasily with the reality of many children’s lives (Nieuwenhuys, 1996). In the policy arena especially, there is a distinct emphasis on excluding them from the production of value because:
The dissociation of childhood from the performance of valued work is considered a yardstick of modernity, and a high incidence of child labor is considered a sign of underdevelopment. (Nieuwenhuys, 1996, p. 237)

Some of the literature on child labour has questioned the notion of the child as a passive victim within the process of labour (Woodhead, 1999) and pointed out that even children in the worst forms of child labour have agency over their lives (Montgomery, 2001). It has also been specifically argued that children in cocoa have agency (Boås & Huser, 2006). The evidence from Ghana which will be presented suggests that while children may have agency as individuals, their ability to make a real choice is considerably constrained by the household dynamics of which they are a part. As a result, their rights (including their rights as workers) are considerably undermined. Of course, the question of choice is not exclusive to children in Ghana and applies to us all. However, it is an important consideration because it shifts the debate from whether child labourers have agency to the degree of agency they have, a question which also has implications for debates on unfree labour. Unfree labour, by its very meaning, implies that individuals are working against their will. As will be discussed, by showing that children are not necessarily working against their will, but that their circumstances denies them choice, this article questions whether they are truly free to enter the workforce or not, and on what terms they can do so. As such, the article argues they are unfree workers even in the absence of actual coercion. While adults may also face very limited choices, the degree of unfreedom faced by children is arguably greater because the choices they can make are much more constrained to start with and they are affected much more markedly by the actions of others. For this reason, the concept of unfree labour cannot be said to apply to adult and child labour in the same way, and recognising the differences between them helps to develop a more nuanced academic approach and more grounded policy-making. This caveat notwithstanding, it is important to acknowledge that some of this literature broadly supports the analysis presented in this article, as will now be discussed.

**Child Labour and Unfree Labour**

Lerche (2007) discusses the ILO strategy towards forced labour of creating public awareness of the phenomenon by quantifying it, a strategy which the ILO has also used in its campaign to raise awareness of child labour. He contends that quantification is problematic because estimates vary. This is reflected in the subject of forced child labour in cocoa where, as previously stated, estimates have fluctuated considerably. More broadly, Lerche argues that the ILO does not challenge the overall system that created the conditions for the occurrence of forced labour in the first place, and that it problematically attempts to deal with them in isolation from their wider social and economic context, which is a view shared in this article. Interestingly, he draws attention to how both the academic and popular literature on forced labour (for example, Bales, 2004, 2005; Banaji, 2003; Brass, 1999) present forced labour ahistorically. The abstraction of labour practices from their wider historical context is common in debates on cocoa production and the present article attempts to address this. However, while Lerche makes a compelling case for a more ‘theoretically and empirically coherent analytical approach to unfree labour relations’ (2007 p. 426), the discussion of the social context of unfree labour relations remains secondary to the wider political discussion of capitalism and neo-liberal globalisation and does not provide a detailed level of ethnographic observation. In most of the literature, there is very limited reference, if any, to the household context of unfree labour relations. This is problematic, especially in analyses of child labour, but also in other discussions of unfree labour, as it overlooks a key component of entry into such relations and of their perpetuation.

While Rogaly (2008) also focuses on unfree labour in relation to capitalism, he provides a more fluid analytical approach incorporating the perspectives of individual workers and contends that such labour relations are spaces of negotiability where workers have agency. This is important, as it presents a more nuanced approach to the power dynamics in labour exchanges. Rogaly argues that the concept
of scale (for example, from nation to household) is important in understanding these because it reveals important disjunctures and contradictions between different scales. This idea is central to the work of Silvey, a feminist geographer, who argues that the prevailing critical theorisations of labour and migration fail to acknowledge the critical segmentation of the processes which shape them, and how these are significant right down to the individual level. She argues that this approach enriches theorisations of power because:

Attention to the national scale as gendered, and concern with the politics of scales both finer and coarser than the national scale allows for the conceptualisation of relational linkages between bodies, households and the transnational sphere. (Silvey, 2004, p. 494)

She argues that a feminist focus on the politics of scale, and against the exclusion of particular scales such as the body and the household, is not a mere call for an additional perspective in an otherwise complete interpretive framework. Instead, she contends that:

It develops understandings of these scales as integral to the analysis of mobility and salient to the operation of forces and processes at those scales conventionally viewed as most central to migration such as the region and the nation. In so doing, feminist migration research breaks ground for re-theorisations of the dynamics between scales and the working of power within particular scales. (Silvey, 2004, p. 494)

Similarly, the present article is not arguing for a more detailed ethnographic approach to child labour in cocoa for its own sake. Rather, it is to show that the individual and household dimension of child labour in cocoa has been overlooked and thus remains widely misunderstood. It is also to show that theorisations of labour which exclude the experiences of individuals as a frame of reference cannot be dissociated from the critically important wider politics of gender. Analyses which do not engage with this dimension are at best partial and at worst may be detrimental to addressing this problem.

Background on Labour in Cocoa Production

To fully understand the wider context and dynamics of labour issues in cocoa production, it is important to note that while abuses have become familiar news stories in recent years, they have been well-documented for much longer, even if the use of coercion has not been consistent across cocoa production globally and throughout time. Clarence-Smith (2000) identifies some of the reasons why unfree labour was more widespread in certain areas at particular times and the general trends in the use of forced labour, which he argues culminated in the second half of the eighteenth century. Forced labour in cocoa is documented in many regions, ranging from Mesoamerica, South America, to Africa and the Caribbean from as early as the 1650s to the twenty-first century (Clarence-Smith, 2000, pp. 195–226). In the twentieth century, the use of slavery in cocoa production was uncovered on the island of Fernando Pó (now known as Bioko) and in Cameroon, both on German and on Duala plantations (Anti-Slavery International, 2004; Clarence-Smith & Ruf, 1996). Anti-Slavery International (2004) reports that the use of slaves from Angola was common on Portuguese plantations on the islands of São Tomé and Principe from the 1880s; according to Clarence-Smith, forced labour in cocoa production continued there until 1962 (2011, personal communication).

Interestingly, such practices were the reason why UK chocolate companies stopped buying cocoa from this area in 1909 and opted to purchase cocoa from Ghana instead (Satre, 2005). Labour conditions in Ghana were reported to be much better than in competing countries, and it was said to be unlikely to develop a system of colonial slavery. In 1908, William Cadbury (who was disillusioned by labour abuses in São Tomé and Principe and under considerable pressure to find a more ethical alternative) reported to his friend and confidant, E.D. Morel, who was a journalist and human rights campaigner, that he had heard positive things about the British colonial authorities in Ghana (still the
Gold Coast at the time). He stated that the ‘natives’ there ‘[are] exceedingly prosperous, and that the Englishman has no chance to get the upper hand’ (cited in Satre, 2005, p. 112). Ghana became Cadbury’s main supplier of cocoa shortly after this. Following training and investment in cocoa production techniques, cocoa underwent a significant expansion in Ghana, and that country went on to become the leading global exporter of cocoa before it was overtaken by Côte d’Ivoire in 1977.

One of the reasons why labour conditions in cocoa were better in Ghana than other countries at the time was because the government had a policy against slavery and slave trading, combating it ‘wherever it was obvious’ (Sutton, 1983, p. 466). This was said to place European cocoa producers at a disadvantage over colonial growers elsewhere, who had government backing for the use of forced labour (Austin, 1996, p. 170). Another reason for better labour practices in cocoa in Ghana was because the crop was being grown by smallholders rather than on plantations, a system which had begun to dominate global cocoa production by 1914 (Clarence-Smith, 2000, p. 189). Smallholder production undermined (although did not rule out) the use of coercion in cocoa cultivation, not just in Ghana, but also in other countries. Clarence-Smith reports that the world’s cocoa was mainly produced by free workers from the middle of the nineteenth century, partly because of labour reforms and partly because of the spread of smallholdings (2000, p. 195).

However, it is important to point out that some unfree labour was used in Ghana. Austin (1996) states that slaves and human pawns represented an important source of labour on early cocoa farms in the Ashanti region. Clarence-Smith reports that smallholders occasionally coerced labour but this was not commonly used because they had access to family labour and cheaper and more flexible arrangements, such as sharecropping (2000, p. 195). Sutton (1983) states that the production of agricultural produce such as palm oil and cocoa on a large scale required more labour than the extended family was able to provide. As a result, Sutton argues that ‘a general picture emerges of the use of slaves, pawns and other bonded labour in the nineteenth century’ (1983, p. 466), but also goes on to explain that it was gradually replaced by wage labour in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Irrespective of the extent to which forced labour was used in cocoa in Ghana, it is clear that the family labour provided by spouses and children made an enormous contribution to the early development of cocoa. Ingham states that:

Lower cash costs of production associated with plentiful supplies of family labour probably provided the basis for the entry of Ghana into the world cocoa industry. (Ingham, 1981, p. 39, italics in original).

Hill describes how farmers, due to their shrewd and forward-thinking financial planning, were ‘reluctant to “waste their savings” on the employment of labour’ (1963, p. 188), and therefore were heavily reliant on the family labour provided by their wives and children. The family labour provided was a crucial aspect of farm expansion, although the labour of women has gradually shifted to the production of foodstuffs for family consumption or sale at local markets, which some writers argue have disadvantaged them (Bukh, 1979; Hill, 1963; Mikell, 1997). Austin (2005, pp. 304–310) provides an excellent and detailed discussion of the role of women in cocoa.

The historical evidence, which focuses heavily on the household dynamics underlying labour practices, stands in contrast to some of the literature on unfree labour which places a heavy emphasis on market processes. While the latter is correct in asserting that labour issues cannot be dissociated from the wider economic system which fuels them, the lack of engagement with factors on other scales is problematic, especially as historical sources show them to be central. More fundamentally, the issues presented illustrate the shifting discourses relating to forced and child labour in the historical context of cocoa production. The reliance on family labour, however unacceptable today if it results in children being involved in hazardous activities, as well as cases of trafficked child labour and other abuses, cannot be compared with previous widespread (and often state-sanctioned) systems of labour involving slavery, human pawning, debt bondage and other abhorrent practices. As Bales points out, in contemporary times ‘for every criminal using slaves to grow cotton or cocoa or sugar, hundreds or thousands of farmers are producing the same crops without using slaves’ (2007, p. 183).
Furthermore, because both good practices and labour abuses in cocoa have strong historical antecedents, they cannot be seen as exclusively symptomatic of the modern consumerist era, or simply caused by poverty or rapacious multinationals, as is often alleged (Berlan, 2004).

Policy Responses To Child Labour in Cocoa

Since concerns about child labour in cocoa started to emerge in the media in 2000–2001, a considerable range of interventions have been put in place to investigate and combat this problem. These are too numerous and complex to expand on here, especially as they span a range of countries and stakeholders, and some of them have been discontinued. However, it is clear that considerable resources have been invested into research and interventions on this subject. Bales (2007, p. 195) states that over $10 million has been raised for anti-slavery work in cocoa; Tulane University reports that the total funds for direct and indirect interventions received since 2001 by the organisations they have surveyed in Ghana and the Ivory Coast exceeds US$15 million (Tulane University, 2009, Appendix 11). Despite such sizeable investments from government, industry and other stakeholders, concerns remain that not enough has been achieved on the ground and the media still report cases of child labour in cocoa, an example being the March 2010 BBC Panorama programme on children working on West African cocoa farms. According to Global Exchange, Green America, the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) and Oasis USA:

It is clear from this report that the cocoa industry is not doing enough to address these problems. The world’s largest chocolate manufacturers must do more to monitor their supply chains to combat child labor, forced labor and human trafficking. (ILRF, 2010)

However, as previously outlined, this article wants to show that poor labour practices also need to be questioned and examined beyond the paradigms of world trade and corporate responsibility. In interviews, many key informants expressed considerable frustration that child labour remains a problem in cocoa production in West Africa. Many of them did not feel that interventions to date had been effective (one key informant referred to them as ‘a complete waste of money’) or even that the problem was sufficiently well understood. Reasons given for the enduring presence of child labour in cocoa often remain fairly general, many sources citing poverty or social traditions of child participation in the household economy. For example, the UK Fairtrade Foundation issued a statement following the March 2010 Panorama programme, saying:

Child labour is caused by deep seated poverty exacerbated by unjust terms of world trade, conflict, drought and extreme weather conditions triggering forced migration. This is the reality that those on cocoa farms in Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast) and Ghana have to deal with on a daily basis. (Fairtrade Foundation, 2010)

Although of course significant, ‘poverty’ as a single justification for child labour is inadequate because it is very vague and in some cases it can even be a misleading explanatory framework (Anyihodo and Ainsworth, 2009; Nieuwenhuys, 1996).

Social Issues Underlying Child Labour in Cocoa Production in Ghana

This section presents some of the findings from anthropological fieldwork carried out in cocoa communities over 15 months in 2001–2003. It details some of the factors in the children’s personal circumstances which affected how and whether they would become involved in what the ILO defines as the worst forms of child labour. On a basic level, fieldwork in Ghana revealed that farmers and their children had varying degrees of agency over their lives. The negotiation of children’s work, and the meaning and value it had acquired in the community, were highly indicative of this agency, a factor
which is both discussed in relation to children and other groups of workers in literature on labour (Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Rogaly, 2008). Many personal beliefs influenced farmers’ decision to involve a child in farm work, such as the belief that work has a formative value, whether the local school was deemed good enough and how far away it was, the age and gender of the child, how interested he or she was in school, whether the child was also working in a different form of employment and how much he or she was earning, whether they were local or migrants and the level of financial investment in farm expansion relative to the investment in schooling. From the perspective of the children, their decision to work in cocoa was influenced by factors such as malnutrition, whether food was available on the farm and/or in school, having a poor educational environment and limited support for education at home, teacher absenteeism, and corporal punishment in school, among other factors.

These factors are very much interconnected with the issues which form the substance of the following discussion, but as they are discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Berlan 2004, 2006, 2009; Casely-Hayford, n.d.), they will not be discussed here. Instead, this section focuses on some of the household dynamics and issues relating to gender which affect child labour and have largely been neglected in debates on cocoa production. A key finding during fieldwork was that family breakdown was both a widespread problem in rural areas and a central factor underlying whether a child would end up in the worst forms of child labour. In the villages where I was based, divorce was very common, and intra-household sexual politics played an important part in determining the fate of children. Few children whose parents were divorced regularly saw both parents, and the village Assemblyman complained that divorce was a major factor in the non-payment of school fees because mothers could not afford the costs associated with education alone. This was also frequently mentioned by children. In virtually all the cases I knew, the mother had remained in the village and the father was working in a nearby town or in another region, thus showing that labour markets and spatial mobility exerted an influence on the rights of children. Most children stayed with their mother after divorce, which placed an enormous financial burden on the women who reported that fathers, irrespective of their financial standing, refused to pay their former wives allowances for the children, as they did not want the women to ‘benefit’ from them financially, especially if they had remarried. As most women in the village worked in activities such as subsistence farming or selling, which typically generate small profits (Manuh, 1997), mothers were unable to bear the costs associated with education, such as school fees, uniforms, exercise books and so forth alone. This finding is supported by another study of child labour in cocoa, which found that ‘cases of children being taken out of school to work on cocoa farms were most prevalent among families which had lost a breadwinner and could be considered female headed’ (Casely-Hayford, n.d., p. 27).

In cases where the mother had remarried, it was common for their new husband to refuse to pay for the upkeep of children from a former marriage, which had a demonstrable impact on whether and when children entered the workforce. Teachers sometimes got involved and went to talk to the mother and stepfather of the children to try and convince them to send the children to school. Unfortunately, there were many cases where no-one intervened in favour of these children and this caused considerable hardship. Such issues are not specific to Ghana, and the plight of children from impoverished households is a global phenomenon. For example, Rahman, Khanam and Absar (1999) also refer to family breakdown as a key factor in children entering the workforce prematurely in Bangladesh.

The children described here were not unfree in the sense of being actively coerced into labour or having gangmasters, but it is questionable whether they had any freedom not to enter the workforce, given the need to secure their own survival, and unfortunately the range of employment available to them was mostly hazardous. Even though children were offering their labour voluntarily, they did so with much less freedom than adults putting themselves forward for employment, and they had little chance of leaving whatever employment they found themselves in given their circumstances. Whereas the children clearly had some agency and were not forced, they did not truly have a choice. This illustrates that the label ‘unfree labour’ does not apply to adults and children in the same way because the pressures on adults and children differ significantly. Furthermore, these children entered the workforce irrespective of market processes and the global politics of power, thereby showing that personal and household dimensions are key considerations which should not be overlooked in
discussions of unfree labour. As explained by Frantz in this issue, the defining feature of slavery has come under question in debates on unfree labour and Bales’s (1999) definition focuses on control rather than ownership. The present case contributes to this discussion by illustrating that in the case of children, neglect is a powerful antecedent and maintainer of control.

In some cases, the children’s ingenuity, resilience and hard work enabled them to return to or remain in school in spite of marital breakdown, depending on the sort of employment they were able to find and whether they had an alternative support network on which to draw. However, this was rarely through agricultural labour and mainly involved short-term migration or daily travel to a nearby town to work in trading or transport. The experiences they shared with me involved a wide spectrum of practices and experiences. For this reason, and as explained in the introduction and argued in relation to other sectors (for example, Phillips, 2011), it is important to avoid a rigid categorisation of the experiences of workers in favour of a more context-specific and relational framework of understanding.

In order to explain child neglect, Casely-Hayford states that within the Akan tradition:

> children are the property of the wife’s family and less interest is taken by the father in bringing up his children since ultimately they will inherit from the wife’s brother. Several interviews with both community members and district stakeholders revealed that this inheritance pattern and tradition often results in fathers neglecting their parental responsibility towards the child. (Casely-Hayford, n.d., p. 22)

From a historical perspective, this claim is slightly problematic. Austin (2005) argues that family labour in cocoa primarily revolved around the conjugal unit rather than traditional matrilineal systems; children (generally male) mainly, though not exclusively, provided labour on their parents’ rather than on their maternal uncles’ farms, and this seems to have been the case from the nineteenth century. Further evidence of this is provided in the 1945–1946 Social Survey of Ashanti (Fortes, Steel, & Ady, 1947). Foster reports that in the late colonial period:

> Particularly among the Akan, there was an increased desire to pass on cocoa lands and income derived from cocoa production to one’s own offspring rather than through the matrilineal line. This led to a progressive weakening of traditional lineage ties and to an increasing desire to avoid traditional kin obligations. (Foster, 1965, p. 127)

This shows that the process of change described here has taken place over a long period of time and is directly linked to the introduction of the cocoa tree to Ghana, where it is not indigenous. Allman (1997) argues that the matrilineal system was weakened, though not destroyed, by the relations of production in cocoa. More broadly, there is a widely accepted view that cocoa drastically altered previous economic relations between husband and wife and that the cocoa industry brought fundamental changes to Ghanaian society (Allman, 1997). In this respect, the development of the cocoa industry is intimately tied to the making of modern Ghana. With regard to the present discussion, the historical evidence is difficult to reconcile with Casely-Hayford’s claim that adherence to traditional matrilineal inheritance systems was the cause of fathers’ neglect towards their offspring, and my own fieldwork also does not substantiate this claim. From interviews, it was clear that the matrilineal system of inheritance was not as robust as in former times. When I asked informants in the village if women could request financial assistance from their brothers as part of the matrilineal system, they replied that matriliny was only very rarely invoked in such situations. Fathers, rather than uncles, were now deemed responsible for the upkeep of their children. The Social Welfare Department was increasingly being used by women and their children to put pressure on men to pay child allowances. If this preliminary form of mediation was unsuccessful, many women took their case to a family court, as explained in Mikell (1997). In one of the local schools in a nearby town, three children had approached the Social Welfare Department and been successful in obtaining funds from their fathers.
This exemplifies some of the older anthropological literature on changing parental and conjugal relations in Ghana. Fortes et al. (1947) report a struggle between advocates and opponents of the matrilineal system based on the Ashanti Survey of 1945–1946, though they also state that matrilineal succession appears to remain the rule at the time. Mikell acknowledges that ‘traditionally, Akan domestic affairs were handled through lineage mediation outside of the state apparatus’ (1997, p. 96), but goes on to argue that ‘Akan women are resorting to the courts because they resent their inability to receive adequate domestic help from either lineage members or husbands, and they are frustrated at the absence of alternative mechanisms for encouraging or pressuring husbands to meet changing domestic needs’ (1997, p. 105). Changes in legal provisions for women and children were also secured by the passing of the Intestate Succession Law in 1985. This law guaranteed certain rights for women and their children (such as the right to inheritance or to child maintenance payments) in the event of their husband’s death or of divorce, and overruled traditional matrilineal or patrilineal systems of obligation (see Manuh, 1997, pp. 77–92).

Therefore, contrary to what Casely-Hayford (n.d.) suggests, it would appear that fathers neglecting their children is not necessarily because they believe that their children will inherit from their wife’s brother, which in my experience seldom ever happened, if at all. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that social change as a result of the expansion of cocoa, formal education and other factors which radically altered the family economy, has eroded the matrilineal system and left a vacuum of obligation. Allman argues that:

As a father's rights grew increasingly inalienable in colonial Asante, they were detached from any reciprocal obligations to his children. A father owned his children whether he provided them with subsistence or not. This transformation occurred at a time when the economic cost of rearing children, particularly as a result of school fees, was rising dramatically ... A father would not be obliged to meet them in order to retain his rights of use in his children. Indeed, there were increasingly fewer ways to encourage/force/persuade a father to view those costs as his obligation, because none of his actions or inactions could threaten his ownership of the children. Fatherhood was now a position endowed with inalienable rights; it was not something you did, that you negotiated via extended processes of exchange involving rights and service. (Allman, 1997, p. 312, italics in original).

In view of this background, it is not surprising that men were reported during my fieldwork to not want to help their former wives in any way, or feel a duty towards paying the school fees of their children. Lingering matrilineal kinship ideology and practices were a part of this, however weakened matrilineal systems may be, but this is not strictly related to inheritance patterns.

While courts and other systems of mediation are by no means a new phenomenon in Ghana (Allman, 1997), they were having a visible and increasing impact in this area, although change was only occurring at a slow pace. At present, women and children in rural Ghana appeared to be suffering as a result of the fact that the traditional matrilineal system of support had been eroded by social change but that its modern replacement (in the form of family courts and other systems of mediation) were not yet yielding the necessary results on a large enough scale. Unfortunately, this directly undermined children’s rights. Of course, divorce and the erosion of traditional systems did not necessarily result in children ending up in the worst form of child labour, but by depriving many children of the opportunity to receive an education, these were certainly key factors influencing this. This suggests that supporting and consolidating organisations such as the Social Welfare Department or the Women and Juvenile Unit of the Police Force (which deals with cases of child labour) could help to fight child labour in rural Ghana. It also raises the question of whether debates and policy-making on child labour and child rights should consider the rights of women to a greater extent. More fundamentally, the data presented here illustrate that it is not only capitalism or market processes which have shaped child labour in cocoa in Ghana. Overlooking localised factors is deeply problematic, as it both obscures possible solutions to labour issues and inadvertently discriminates against women.
Conclusion

Frantz (this issue) argued that unfree labour was not simply a ‘kink’ in the Jordanian economy but rather an integral part of it. Similarly, this article has argued that child labour is very much imbedded in the socio-local dynamics of Ghanaian society. It has also contended that historical and anthropological knowledge can help provide a better understanding of it. In initiatives to deal with child labour in cocoa production in Ghana, there has been a considerable push towards sensitising communities about the risks and dangers of child labour, but one could argue that it is policy-makers who would benefit from sensitisation on the wider context of child labour in cocoa. The data presented here also suggest that because of its long socio-historical antecedents, a grassroots, rather than a top–down, approach is best suited to tackling child labour. Furthermore, it would appear that unless the policy net is cast wider to include interventions to support the rights of women, especially those who experience marital breakdown, the effectiveness of interventions in this area may be hindered in the long term.

In cocoa and other sectors there has been a tendency to pathologise child labour and focus on its negative and harmful consequences. There can be no doubt that children who end up in the worst forms of child labour suffer considerably, not only through the physical and psychological damage that may result from such work, but also because they are robbed of the precious opportunity to receive an education. The data have also shown that personal circumstances can create very powerful bonds for children, even in the absence of actual coercion and even if they remain in their home community. However, treating child labour as a social ill in its own right may be misleading, because in the present case it is very much symptomatic of a much broader malaise linked with family breakdown and gender inequality than a social ‘disease’ in its own right. This is inextricably linked with the fact that Ghana is a society undergoing a significant social transition and currently in flux between tradition and modernity. In a practical sense, conjecture cannot address labour abuses; empirical knowledge, contextualisation and a holistic appreciation of the causes and factors underlying them need to form a greater part of such debates.

The literature on child labour which acknowledges the agency of children makes a valuable point, but as the present case has highlighted the analysis needs to go further and the fact that child workers may have agency should not mask the absence of choice they often face. Furthermore, while some academic literature acknowledges the need for more empirically led critiques of the prevailing paradigms on labour and the need for scalar differentiations within labour processes, the extent to which this has been realised is disappointing. In spite of well-argued critiques favouring more subjective and context-based approaches, there often remains an emphasis on much wider and unilateral paradigms of causality.

Finally, the question of whether the concept of unfree labour applies to adult and child labour in the same way is at the heart of key debates within the literature on unfree labour and child labour about the need to challenge categorisations. Categorisation goes hand-in-hand with attempts to quantify labour practices which, as discussed, authors such as Lerche (2007) have pointed out is unhelpful. Labels can hinder the deconstruction of the processes inherent to unfree labour, and the literature on this makes a compelling case for them to come under greater scrutiny. Of course, the removal of labels and the appropriate contextualisation of unfree labour is far-ranging and there are no discernible ends to such an enterprise. This is compounded by the fact that, as Barrientos (this issue) has shown, it is an evolving landscape where exploitation and vulnerability feed off ever more complex and rapidly expanding commercial networks. For this reason, it is clear that this is an area of research with considerable scope and where continual probing remains crucial.

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Notes

1. The survey relied on a sample of about 600 cocoa farming households in six districts proportionately selected (based on the cocoa production figures for each region from the 2004/2005 season) from the four main cocoa regions of Ghana. Further information on the sampling procedure, listing of households, child selection procedure and so forth is provided in NPECLC (2007).

2. To name a few, initiatives (either research or interventions) on this have involved Tulane University, the West Africa Commercial Agriculture Programme (WACAP), the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA), the Sustainable Tree Crops Programme (STCP), the International Cocoa Initiative (ICI), the International Labour Organisation and many governments and NGOs such as Save the Children and Anti-Slavery International. The third annual report of Tulane University, *Oversight of Public and Private Initiatives to Eliminate the Worst Forms of Child Labor in the Cocoa Sector of Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana* (2009), provides a comprehensive list of many direct and indirect funding initiatives in this area. NPECLC (2007) also lists some of the studies carried out on child labour in cocoa in Ghana.

3. The issues of marriage and divorce in Ghana have been covered extensively in anthropological literature (Antubam, 1963, pp. 117–124; Danquah, 1928, p. 162; Kaye, 1962, pp. 135–136; Mikell, 1997, pp. 96–117; Oppong, 1974; Rattray, 1969, pp. 22–32), and many of these sources draw attention to the commonness of divorce. Antubam states: ‘To [the Ghanaian], God gave man and woman their free will either to come together or to stay apart. The marriage strings that bring them together, therefore, are made flexible enough to make it possible for either member of the partnership to break away, if and when he or she chooses. Divorce is, for that reason, regarded neither as an anti-social act, nor a serious religious sacrilege’ (1963, p. 117).

4. See, for example, the story in Kofi in Casely-Hayford (n.d., pp. 22–23), a story which strongly echoed the narratives of many of the participants in my study.

5. The Akans are a matrilineal ethnic group living in the southern and central parts of Ghana where cocoa production is prevalent.

References


